

Youth Service (II)

St George's Cathedral, Southwark 28th March 2004

Homily by Archbishop Kevin McDonald

I want to talk this afternoon about belonging. As some of you know, since I became Archbishop I've been visiting deaneries and on this initial visit I've been meeting the priests and the deanery pastoral council – a group of lay people from each deanery (later I will be meeting with deacons, religious, and chaplains) and I must say I'm most impressed both by what our priests and people are doing and impressed, too, by the opportunities and challenges that face us in the Church today, especially in the multi-cultural context of South London. One of the things that has come across very strongly has been the different kinds of groups that people belong to, either within parishes or across parish boundaries – groups, organisations, people coming together to pray, to read the scriptures together, groups for “*lectio divina*” – for hearing the Word of God together –, SVP, Legion of Mary, charismatic prayer groups, Pro-Life groups and larger scale groups like neo-catechumenate, Opus Dei, the Faith organisation, Focolare movement. I *sense a need to belong* and we can ask ourselves what friendship, what groups exist for me? There is a need to belong to something that is more intimate, more demanding, or more fulfilling than simply belonging to a parish. Sometimes people just join groups where they are able to share their thoughts and experiences. And I'd like you to reflect on the groups you belong to, why you belong to them – what is it you share and have in common? What are the sort of groups you'd like to belong to, or you'd like to exist for you.

Now, of course, the Church itself is a community. It's a community that is worldwide, a community that has existed for 2000 years with a faith and teaching, sacramental life and with a Church order that has been handed on from generation to generation. A community led by the Holy Spirit in which each of us has a role, a place, a vocation. We are part of the history of the Church, of the movement through time which is the Church. And our belonging together as the Catholic Church has a special word to specify it. That word is “Communion”.

Although, when we speak of “Communion”, we usually think of Holy Communion, which we

receive at Mass, it literally means participating together in something, doing something together. We share the same scriptures, the same sacraments, the same system of Church order. We belong to a worldwide network of dioceses each headed by a bishop who is in communion with the bishop of Rome, the Pope. And it is our Catholic faith that everything that is necessary to belong fully to the Church is present in the Catholic Church. We belong in the fullest sense to the People of God. Anywhere we go in the world, we participate by right in the Mass and other sacraments and we receive Communion, receive the body of the Lord which is an expression of our being in communion. We express our belonging to the Church, our sharing of the Catholic faith, our continuity with the Catholic Church through history by our receiving Holy Communion together.

The wonderful first reading we heard was a description of the earliest days of the Church. It was a small group of people who came together “for the breaking of bread and the prayers”. It also seems that they held their goods in common. This beautiful picture of communion has been an inspiration to the Church ever since. In particular it has been the inspiration behind the monastic orders. As you know, as the Church grew, it was persecuted: in the early centuries of the Church, the Church grew from the blood of the martyrs. The martyrs saw themselves as following in the footsteps of Christ. But eventually the age of persecution came to an end and the monastic tradition in the Church grew up because people wanted to live a radical Christian life, giving themselves completely to God. Living a life of poverty, of obedience, of celibacy, without private property was seen as a sign of contradiction in the face of a society marked by greed, and the desire for power. And throughout Christian history there have been orders, movements, communities that have sought to live the Christian life totally seriously, giving up everything for Christ. The Franciscan movement is perhaps the most famous and the figure of St Francis has never ceased to capture the imagination. It's vitally important to find support from other people who share your ideas; we need

others to strengthen and confirm us in our faith and commitment.

But let's look at our ordinary life as Catholics. Now we may not have a monastic vocation. We may not have a support group but let's not underestimate the importance of simply being at Mass. At Mass we are in communion. We hear the Word of God together, we receive the body and blood of the Lord together. We exchange the sign of peace. It's important to recognise the absolute centrality of the Mass in our lives. It doesn't matter if Mass is celebrated very solemnly or very simply. When we celebrate Mass we are being the community that God intended human beings to belong to – the most important thing we do.

Soon the Church will be celebrating the most important feast in the year: Easter. At the Easter Vigil we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Celebrating Easter has always been the most important thing that Christians do, going right back to the earliest Christian communities that I spoke about earlier. The earliest Christians were known as people who celebrated the resurrection of their Lord from the dead. They worshipped him as their Lord. And so have Christians done throughout the ages. Whether in great Cathedrals or simple chapels it is the same faith and the same celebration.

Finally I want to mention World Youth Day in Cologne next year when the Pope invites young people to join him, to receive teaching from him and to celebrate the Eucharist with him. I hope that many young people from Southwark will go. I'm going though I'm not young, but it will be a wonderful time of belonging: belonging to the universal Church united with the Pope, the successor of St Peter. We all belong, we all have our place, our vocation in the Church. Let us praise and thank God for our Catholic faith and for our belonging to the body which is the Church.